

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 002407

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/24/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#) [BGD](#)

SUBJECT: OUTGOING CHIEF ELECTION COMMISSIONER FRETS ABOUT THE FUTURE

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, reason 1.4 (d).

1. (C) Summary. Just retired Chief Election Commissioner Syed says reforms are critical for the next general election because of the unprecedented bitterness in Bangladeshi politics. His reform proposals focus on strengthening the integrity of the Election Commission and the voting process, as opposed to consensus caretaker appointments, but, he said, the "underdog" Awami League's calls for consultations reflect a broad Bangladeshi desire for change. Regarding the Chittagong mayoral election, there were minor problems but no last-minute BNP push to subvert the vote count as alleged by the AL. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On May 21, his penultimate day as Chief Election Commissioner, MA Syed presented to President Iajuddin Ahmed a six-point electoral reform program: an independent, financially autonomous secretariat for the Election Commission (EC); the introduction of electronic voting machines and an electronic voter roll; army deployment in city corporation and municipal polls; and the creation of an electoral inquiry committees for local government elections. "The reforms in the election commission should be brought in through a consensus of the political parties," he told reporters.

3. (C) On May 24, Syed discussed with us his five-year tenure as CEC and his outlook on the next election.

WHAT WERE YOUR MAIN ACCOMPLISHMENTS AS CEC?

Elections are nothing new in Bangladesh. The British left us a pretty good system, but there's still a lot left to do. We must strive and learn from countries like the U.S. Bangladeshis love elections, but there is a group of powerful people with a hidden agenda who want to win by hook or by crook. In the 2001 election, I convinced the president that he had to send out the army. That was very important. My dream is better, more acceptable, free and fair elections.

WHAT WERE YOUR FRUSTRATIONS AS CEC?

Number one, it's what all people talk about, law and order. Nobody can hide that. This used to be a peaceful country. Terrorism is a new problem. I shouted myself hoarse calling for army for the local parishad elections. If the government had cooperated, those elections would have been much cleaner.

IT'S NO SECRET YOU HAD PROBLEMS WITH EC SECRETARY SM ZAKARIA.

I brought him in because he had good experience, even though he was under a cloud at his old ministry. But I learned I couldn't trust him. He altered corrections I made on a document. You have to be able to trust your right hand man. Twice I wrote to the PM asking her to remove him. She refused, and he is now in their books.

ANYTHING YOU'D DO DIFFERENTLY IN HINDSIGHT?

Assert more independence. Election is a very sensitive matter in Bangladesh. I tried to set an example for correctness, to inspire confidence by action.

WHAT ABOUT THE MAY 9 MAYORAL ELECTION IN CHITTAGONG? IS IT TRUE, AS THE AWAMI LEAGUE SAYS, THAT THE BNP TRIED TO HIJACK THE VOTE COUNT AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR?

We had quite a lot of concerns, but we ensured law and order, and generally everyone accepted the election. This should be the model. It wasn't perfect, we have many deficiencies. Some people said the vote count was slow, but that's why I propose using electronic voting machines. The election was widely watched. Both parties are strong, which is itself a safeguard. There were media reports of attempted manipulation, but these were only stray incidents.

WHAT HAPPENED AT LAST SUMMER'S DHAKA 10 BY-ELECTION? WAS IT AS BLATANTLY RIGGED AS PEOPLE SAID? WHAT DOES IT SUGGEST FOR THE GENERAL ELECTION?

It was a disgrace. I was in the U.S. at the time attending the marriage of my son, but the party in power applied all means, fair and foul, to win. There's an old saying: winning or losing is the least part of the battle, it's how you fight

that counts. This was a prestige matter for the BNP. You need a firm, determined government to be neutral to stop things like this. The BNP will face one big obstacle at the general election: a caretaker government, not them, will be in the saddle.

WHAT ARE THE PROSPECTS FOR YOUR REFORM PROPOSALS? WHAT ABOUT AL DEMANDS FOR CARETAKER/ELECTORAL CHANGES?

We hope for the best, prepare for the worst. The need for change is general and felt by all Bangladeshis. I'm more concerned with my proposals because good governance is key, and a fully independent Election Commission should have the authority to decide what is doable and acceptable. Measured steps give people hope and confidence in the process. CAN THE GENERAL ELECTION SUCCEED WITHOUT THESE REFORMS?

No. The reforms are very critical. The government has to demonstrate goodwill by bringing in wholesome reforms. The U.S. has a lot of influence and credibility. It would not be interfering but helping our process if you ensured good governance and credible elections. The U.S. is an old friend of Bangladesh with no ax to grind here.

The constitutional amendment that added two years to the Chief Justice's service was very frustrating and immoral. Transparency is very important in today's world. Whoever the authority is, it should sit down with the major parties and accept proposals that are doable, like making the EC truly independent of the Prime Minister's Office. Honest people can do a lot if the structure is right. It's bothersome that the two parties don't talk to each other. The adversarial attitude is so deep, who will ensure a level playing field?

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF YOUR SUCCESSOR AS CEC, JUSTICE MA AZIZ?

I don't know him. But why the hush hush in appointing him at the last minute? Who is he? When the Awami League chose me, the BNP complained, but then the BNP won the 2001 election with a thumping majority. Does he have the integrity and guts to do this job? The opposition wanted consultation, and it would have been gracious of the government to do that because of the current situation. The political situation has never been so bitter and adversarial.

14. (C) Comment: Bangladesh badly needs a CEC maverick like India's T.N. Seshan to instill verve and confidence in its electoral management, but neither Syed nor his successor (septel) fits that mold.

THOMAS